



Emergency Leaders for Climate Action

Submission to: Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

Addressed to: Department of Home Affairs and the National Emergency Management Authority

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About Emergency Leaders for Climate Action

Emergency Leaders for Climate Action is a growing coalition of former senior Australian fire and emergency service leaders representing every fire service in Australia, a number of SES and land management agencies, communicating the seriousness of the climate change threat, calling for government action on emissions and the necessary resources to better prepare fire and emergency services for increasingly frequent and damaging extreme weather events.

To find out more about Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, visit:

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Introduction and Summary of Recommendations

Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide this response to the discussion paper on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response.

Communities in Australia and worldwide are being pummelled by escalating extreme weather disasters, driven by the relentless burning of fossil fuels (Climate Council 2023). While we must make every possible effort to limit future harms by driving down greenhouse gas emissions this decade, we must also redouble our efforts to cope with the worsening impacts of climate change. That is, focus strongly on climate change adaptation.

In 2020, following the devastating 2019-20 Black Summer fire season, ELCA brought together former and current emergency leaders, Indigenous fire practitioners, health professionals, bushfire survivors, and many others to share their experiences and to formulate recommendations. The outcome of this summit was an Australian Bushfire and Climate Plan, with 165 recommendations for building resilience and improving crisis response (ELCA and Climate Council 2022). This submission draws on a number of recommendations from that summit, along with more recent research and experiences.

A common theme in this submission is the need to invest in the people who will help keep our communities safe today and tomorrow. This means equipping communities with the tools to protect themselves (see Sections 1 and 3), supporting and retaining volunteers (Section 2), and better resourcing and leveraging existing community-based emergency management frameworks (Section 4). We note that it will take some time to develop new capabilities, and therefore caution against phasing out the role of the Australian Defence Force in disaster response too quickly (Section 5). Lastly, we emphasize the need for all levels of government to invest in reducing disaster risks through climate change adaptation and resilience building, recognizing that spending on such measures is still dwarfed by spending on disaster response and recovery (Section 6).

This submission is not intended to be exhaustive of all the capabilities that need to be developed to respond to worsening disaster risks. Rather, it highlights some recurring issues and recommendations that we believe are particularly pertinent to this inquiry and which can be implemented right now to ensure Australian communities are better protected.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Support grass-roots community-led preparedness, response and recovery efforts through establishment of permanent community resilience hubs, enlisting communities, and equipping them with the necessary tools, information, and training.
2. Support volunteer recruitment, retention, upskilling and wellbeing through increased funding; access to education and career pathways; accounting of volunteer time; (where appropriate) training in leadership and decision making; exploring opportunities for remuneration for volunteers deployed for extended periods.
3. Pilot a program of paid seasonal firefighters, who would bolster the ranks of urban fire services on the urban / bushland interface by crewing bushfire tankers. They would also be available to provide relief for volunteer fire crews suffering fatigue and stress from lengthy deployments, while also providing a capability to provide a first wave of emergency relief in the post-disaster recovery phase.
4. Expand the National Emergency Management Stockpile to include inventories of specialised equipment identified as crucial to initial community clean-up and recovery.
5. Expand the concept of the National Emergency Management Stockpile to include inventories of large plant and equipment held by the private sector, with standard contracts for rapid deployment pre-negotiated with suitable providers.
6. Prioritise the resourcing of existing community-led response and recovery frameworks over the creation of new organisations.
7. Leverage existing community-based volunteer emergency service infrastructure to establish new “non-operational” volunteer arms concerned primarily with community education, development of local resilience plans, and coordinating/implementing community recovery after a disaster (for example plant operators).
8. A withdrawal of the Australian Defence Force from domestic disaster response should occur gradually, and alongside a major effort to boost community-led disaster response and recovery capabilities.
9. Governments at all levels must collaborate to reverse the funding trend that sees most disaster-related funds going towards response and recovery, by increasing public investment in adaptation and resilience.

1. Enlist communities and equip them with the tools to protect themselves

“Government needs to harness, celebrate and empower safe and coordinated community-led initiatives.”

-2022 NSW Flood Inquiry

As we saw in the 2019-20 Black Summer fires and the 2022 east coast floods, we are a nation of people who help our neighbours.

Countless lives have been saved through the rapid and courageous responses of local communities and spontaneous volunteers to disasters. For example, and as acknowledged in the New South Wales Government’s 2022 flood inquiry, there would have been significantly higher loss of life from the 2022 east coast floods were it not for community-led flood rescues (New South Wales Government 2022). Rather than criticise and blame emergency services and governments for being overwhelmed by out of scale climate-fuelled disasters, we should instead celebrate, support and resource development of grass roots response and recovery capabilities within communities: that is, build true resilience.

Keeping Australians safe in the face of escalating disaster risks due to climate change means enlisting local communities and equipping them with the tools and training to protect themselves. For example:

- In fire-prone areas, communities should be equipped with basic firefighting equipment to use in an emergency, for example the successful Community Fire Unit program in NSW and the ACT.
- In flood-prone areas, communities need to know how to safely utilise private boats for urgent rescues, and have access to caches of basic shore-based water rescue equipment (for example, throw-lines and life jackets).
- Basic practical measures like free access to a safely constructed and located local community hall – so that people can come together to plan and coordinate – or to shelter, can make a big difference to a community’s ability to plan and coordinate efforts and to remain safe in a disaster.

- Information including locations of phone towers, water supplies, and other utilities, and their protection, can likewise become vital in a disaster scenario.

To support community-led disaster preparedness and response efforts, ELCA has recommended the establishment of permanent community resilience hubs in every local government area in vulnerable parts of the country, funded by Federal, State and Territory governments. Further information on this proposal can be found in recommendation 105 (page 30) of our Australian Bushfire and Climate Plan (2020).

Enlisting communities in these ways may not only save lives following a disaster, but enable communities to work together to reduce disaster risks and to adapt to the impacts of climate change before disasters strike. (See more on boosting climate change adaptation efforts in Section 6, below.)

Better equipping local communities to respond to disasters must not be seen as a substitute for boosting existing commonwealth, state and local emergency and recovery services and arrangements, but as an additional measure – one that enables a community to build on its existing strengths, that acknowledges we face ever increasing disaster risks due to climate change, and which recognise that no matter how well resourced, our (predominantly volunteer) emergency services cannot be everywhere at once. Indeed, when communities are seriously impacted by disasters, so too are the first responders who live within those communities.

Recommendation

1. Support grass-roots community-led preparedness, response and recovery efforts through establishment of permanent community resilience hubs, enlisting communities, and equipping them with the necessary tools, information, and training.

2. Increase efforts to attract, upskill and retain volunteers

ELCA recognizes that the increasing severity, scale and duration of disasters fuelled by climate change is placing a heavy strain on emergency service volunteers. Volunteers face longer deployments, increasing the risks of exhaustion, lost income, and other negative impacts. Volunteers also face increasingly challenging scenarios that require strong leadership and decision-making skills. Unwarranted criticism when emergency services are overwhelmed by climate-fuelled out-of-scale disasters discourages current and potential volunteers.

Volunteers play a critical role in keeping Australians safe, now and in future. It is essential they be appropriately valued and supported. ELCA sees a need to seriously examine incentives to attract and retain volunteers across emergency preparedness, response and recovery, as well as measures to support the health and wellbeing of volunteers.

Suggestions put forward in the Australian Bushfire and Climate Plan (2020), and in our recent correspondence with the Minister, include:

- Increase Federal, State and Territory funding for volunteer recruitment, training and retention.
- Incentivise volunteering in regional / rural areas through access to education pathways. For example, volunteers might access fee-free TAFE, gain accreditation from on-the-job training, and have these qualifications be portable to other workplaces and careers.
- Ensure better accounting of the time provided by volunteers, as a first concrete measure towards greater recognition of and respect for volunteer efforts.
- Expand training, in particular those at the top of the organisation, including volunteer incident controllers and officers, who require strong leadership and decision-making skills to cope with increasingly challenging scenarios.
- Further explore the question of remuneration for volunteers who are deployed for extended periods and suffer hardship and / or loss of income.

In cities and large regional centres, full time urban firefighters play a vital role in responding to all types of emergencies, and in supporting volunteer agencies with specialised skills, such as urban search and rescue (building collapse

rescue), use of Uncrewed Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and swift water rescue. In urban-bushland interface areas they sometimes provide the main firefighting force during bushfire emergencies.

There have been calls to “professionalise” firefighting in sections of the media. This is a simplistic response to a complicated issue, and in a practical sense, it is a solution that Australia cannot possibly afford.

However there are models in place overseas that leverage the operational capabilities of urban fire services and scale them to meet variable risk scenarios.

Some urban fire services in California, for example Los Angeles County, Orange County, and CalFire, employ “seasonal firefighters” to bolster the ranks of professional firefighters during their wildfire season. They scale numbers according to assessed fire risk each season, and source people who aspire to become full time firefighters, providing them with specialised training in bushfire fighting. They are stationed at “fire camps” strategically located in high-risk areas, and respond to support fire engine and firefighting aircraft crews.

This is a cost-effective approach compared to employing large numbers of fully trained permanent firefighters 24/7, 365 days of the year.

Forest Fire Management Victoria employs seasonal firefighters, so there is an established model domestically.

Establishment of seasonal firefighter programs would enable urban fire services to better provide bushfire fighting support to rural fire services, and to provide relief to volunteers in areas subjected to ongoing fires.

Recommendations

2. Support volunteer recruitment, retention, upskilling and wellbeing through increased funding; access to education and career pathways; accounting of volunteer time; (where appropriate) training in leadership and decision making; exploring opportunities for remuneration for volunteers deployed for extended periods.

3. Pilot a program of paid seasonal firefighters, who would bolster the ranks of urban fire services on the urban / bushland interface by crewing bushfire tankers. They would also be available to provide relief for volunteer fire crews suffering fatigue and stress from lengthy deployments, while also providing a capability to provide a first wave of emergency relief in the post-disaster recovery phase.

3. Expand the National Emergency Management Stockpile to include inventories of clean up and recovery equipment

ELCA commends the development of the \$8.6 million National Emergency Management Stockpile (NEMS), designed to provide ready access to emergency shelters, generators, sandbags, water purification systems, and other lifesaving resources following a disaster.

We recommend that the NEMS be expanded beyond immediate lifesaving resources to include inventories of equipment required for community clean up and recovery efforts. Expanding the NEMS to include these inventories would help communities to more quickly get on the road to recovery. In our own experience, initial recovery efforts are also often hampered through being unable to access necessary equipment, particularly heavy plant and machinery that once were available from local councils. This gap needs to be addressed through development of inventories of plant and equipment available from the private sector, with standard procurement contracts pre-negotiated and ready to deploy.

Recommendations

4. Expand the National Emergency Management Stockpile to include inventories of specialised equipment identified as crucial to initial community clean-up and recovery.

5. Expand the concept of the National Emergency Management Stockpile to include inventories of large plant and equipment held by the private sector, with standard contracts for rapid deployment pre-negotiated with suitable providers.

4. Focus on resourcing existing frameworks and organisations, rather than creating new ones

ELCA firmly believes that gaps in capabilities are better fixed through better resourcing of existing emergency management frameworks and organisations than by creating new agencies or NGOs. Indeed, we are concerned that the creation of a new organisation – such as a new arm of the Australian Defence Force or a new civilian-based disaster recovery organisation – would duplicate existing structures and be needlessly expensive as large sums would have to be spent on new administrative, communication, and management arrangements and facilities. Moreover, it is important that recovery efforts be genuinely community-based and led, rather than remotely led from top-down.

Rather than exploring the creation of new organisations, ELCA encourages the creation of roles within existing local frameworks, having local frameworks that go beyond first response to include long-term recovery, and which leverage resources from all levels of government, the private and not-for-profit sectors.

In saying this, ELCA concedes that the necessary skill sets do not necessarily exist in current emergency services to take on community-led recovery, and rank structures could repel rather than attract the types of community volunteers who might be attracted to non-response work. Emergency services are increasingly being overwhelmed with escalating response demands, and do not have the capacity in existing structures to take on new roles. It is therefore recommended that new arms of existing emergency services be established under separate, non-uniformed leadership with suitable skill sets, but side by side with the emergency response arms. Plant operators are one example of non-uniformed volunteers and a useful addition to existing emergency services, noting that much of this is currently provided by the Australian Defence Force.

Recommendations

6. Prioritise the resourcing of existing community-led response and recovery frameworks over the creation of new organisations.

7. Leverage existing community-based volunteer emergency service infrastructure to establish new “non-operational” volunteer arms concerned primarily with community education, development of local resilience plans, and coordinating/implementing community recovery after a disaster (for example plant operators).

5. Avoid premature withdrawal of the Australian Defence Force from disaster recovery efforts

While Australian communities are better prepared today than in the lead-up to the 2019-20 Black Summer fires, considerable further work is required at the community level, from the private sector, and across all levels of government if we are to prepare for the worsening impacts of climate change.

In this light, and while accepting that it may be unsustainable in the long term for the Australian Defence Force to play a major role in domestic disaster response, we caution that any withdrawal must be gradual and occur only as sufficient measures are developed and implemented to further build community-led disaster response and recovery capabilities.

Recommendation

8. A withdrawal of the Australian Defence Force from domestic disaster response should occur gradually, and alongside a major effort to boost community-led disaster response and recovery capabilities.

6. Prioritise investment in adaptation and resilience

While recognising the need to boost emergency response and recovery capabilities, ELCA also recognises the urgent need to increase investment in resilience (ELCA and Climate Council 2023).

Between 2005-2022, the Federal Government spent almost \$24 billion on disaster recovery and relief, with just \$0.51 billion allocated to resilience. Investing in risk reduction and resilience provides a 'triple dividend' of avoided loss and suffering, reduced disaster costs and potential economic and social benefits even in the absence of hazards occurring.

There is a critical need to upscale public investments in resilience and develop innovative financing pathways. The process for allocating public funds towards resilience projects must be independent and data driven, ideally deploying an accepted needs-based funding model that ensures funds focus on the most at-risk and vulnerable communities.

Recent funding announcements, including an additional \$1 billion for adaptation and resilience-building through the Disaster Ready Fund, are an important step to reversing a persistent trend that has seen the vast majority of disaster-related funding going towards response and recovery, but investment clearly needs to increase further. Previous failures to fund preparation and resilience measures have created a cycle of increasing response and recovery costs that can only be reduced by long-term investment in adaptation and resilience.

Recommendation

9. Governments at all levels must collaborate to reverse the funding trend that sees most disaster-related funds going towards response and recovery, by increasing public investment in adaptation and resilience.

References

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